

September 14, 1971

To: Professor Albert Szabo
From: Amos Vogel
Re: Film at Harvard

I respond with trepidation and interest to your suggestion for a memorandum of my impressions and ideas concerning 'Film at Harvard'; trepidation, because I am a visitor not necessarily sure of facts or larger framework; interest, because my life-long preoccupation with the artistic and educational aspects of film makes me sense an opportunity at Harvard for action and change. It would be rewarding indeed if I could contribute to and be associated with it.

What follows, then, is necessarily tentative, having been gleaned from around the edges of a hot and busy summer campus and good talks with several knowledgeable staff members. Quite consciously, my suggestions are related to need rather than financial feasibility, a subject I consider beyond my frame of reference.

I. FILM AS AN ART AT HARVARD

Film is coming of age in our academic institutions. A veritable 'explosion' in new courses and new film departments has taken place in colleges nationally, reflecting the tremendous interest in 'film-as-art' among the student population. A 1971 American Film Institute survey revealed that budget for film programs in American colleges and universities had increased over 300% in the past five years. Close to two thousand film courses are now being taught; seventy schools now offer a major in film.

Given this context, it is clear that the Harvard film curriculum needs strengthening. A small number of film courses are currently being offered, touching eclectically upon some areas, overlapping at times, omitting others. While such unplanned growth represents a healthy first response to a new need, it should now be 'shaped' into a program comparable to other disciplines in breadth and seriousness, by the development of a plan of study both comprehensive yet open to growth.

Such a plan would stress the inherent characteristics of film that make it an art and distinguish it from others; an art of images moving in time, a dynamic progression of plastic, kinetic elements, through whose analysis one determines latent or explicit 'meaning' in sociological, psychological, philosophical terms.

Film study is complicated by the medium's transience and invisibility. Unless the proper tools are available, the student cannot 're-read' a scene to analyze structure, style, grammar. The rapidity of the

visual onslaught - twenty-four images per second - poses new problems of perception and analysis.

The creation of an over-all plan of film study requires film staff capable of teaching as well as giving administrative and creative direction to it and to Harvard's other film activities. It is essential that such film personnel display an openness to and knowledge of all tendencies in world cinema (classics as well as avant-garde, features as well as shorts, commercial cinema as well as independent productions) and an ability to transmit one's own passion and knowledge to others. Considering the newness of the field and the almost total absence of film PhDs (the few PhDs granted are not in film, but in English, communications, etc.), such a requirement may be less appropriate than it unquestionably is in other disciplines.

Only further study can confirm whether the film faculty should be part of one department (such as Carpenter or Fine Arts) or inter-departmental; the latter may be preferable. Also to be determined is the nature and proportion of courses offering actual production work.

The development of this masterplan requires a dynamic balancing of the need for coordination and integration, while maintaining the autonomy of individual departments at the University.

It should also encompass the very advisable development of special short-term film 'institutes' and conferences, built around a topic, tendency or new development in film, with prominent guest lecturers, critics and film directors (and their new films), attracting an entirely new group of students (including film professionals). The resulting inter-disciplinary 'cross-fertilization' would be valuable in itself and an antidote to the frequent provincialism of the professional film scene. Such annual conferences would swiftly be institutionalized into events of national import.

To supplement necessarily sporadic programming of film societies and inevitably profit-oriented exhibition policies of Boston cinemas, Harvard could also initiate carefully planned, educationally-oriented film series and special events on campus, focusing on particular directors, national schools, specific genres. Facilities, audiences, interest and need exist; such events could well be income-producing.

II. FILM AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL AT HARVARD

With a very few exceptions, the educational utilization of film in the teaching of other disciplines at Harvard is non-existent; and this despite the fact that there are literally hundreds of outstanding films in all areas of human endeavor and knowledge, whose use could significantly contribute to Harvard's educational programs. (My own files, for example, include data and evaluations on over 20,000 such films). I refer to documentaries, psychological and scientific studies, films on literature and history, linguistics and world peace, newsreel compilations and interviews with artists, intellectuals and political leaders. Could not Satyajit Ray's *PATHER PANCHALI* be fruitfully used in a course on the sociology of India, Ingmar Bergman's films in comparative religion, Fellini's *SATYRICON* or Visconti's *DEATH IN VENICE* in literature, a Japanese study of cancer cell growth, in medicine?

Could not a film of Picasso in the actual process of creating a painting on glass, the camera stationed behind it, be used in the teaching of the fine arts, or a film directed and starred in by the Japanese novelist Mishima, in which he ritualistically commits hara-kiri, made ten years prior to his actual suicide by the same method, be used in psychology, mythology or Japanese civilization? The list of films and subject areas is literally endless.

From an educational viewpoint, shorts are preferable to features because of easier integration into class schedules, extreme variety of styles and subjects in concentrated time periods, and lesser cost. The extremely strong response of my class to this kind of film shows that students are unaware of huge areas of educationally relevant films and consider their exposure to such materials essential. Cinemas and film societies in Cambridge do not show this kind of material.

These films are available from national film distributors. However, since their catalogs list several thousand titles in the respective subject areas, a film specialist is required to provide the various Harvard departments with appropriate information as to content and quality and to suggest titles even where need is not yet felt due to lack of information.

It is worth considering the publication of an inexpensive internal faculty newsletter, describing, with source information and evaluations, new films or classics in various subject areas, providing information about screening facilities at Harvard, listings of film collections at various Harvard departments, technical hints regarding projection etc. A system of previewing important new releases by appropriate faculty members, for purposes of review in the newsletter, could also be instituted.

III. SUPPORTING FILM SERVICES AND NEEDS AT HARVARD

A. Even at current levels of film utilization at Harvard, the number and condition of projectors available is unsatisfactory. Harvard needs

- at least ten new projectors (of the same model, as chosen by film professionals) to standardize maintenance and facilitate training of school projectionists
- a part- or full-time motion picture service technician, to check equipment after each use and repair it when necessary. At present, projectors are repaired by outside firms, at preposterous rates and with delays running into weeks.
- to continue to train and supply projectionists by means of its Audio-Visual Services office; this is essential for proper performance and avoidance of damage to films and equipment.
- to permanently install projection in at least two or three locations within the University, to avoid mishaps so frequently associated with temporary installations, to reduce wear and tear on equipment, permit more rapid set-ups, and encourage the use of film for educational purposes and special events. One location should be equipped for 35mm projection as well.

B. The advisability of 'Central Booking' of films (once selected by individual professors) must be carefully investigated.

The full 'autonomy' under which various film users at Harvard presently book films on their own has the following results:

- unnecessary duplication of bookings; a film is shown by one department one day, mailed back to source and returns a few days later for another booking by another department.
- non-arrival of films: mails and distributors' staffs being what they are, it would be best to leave the metaphysical mysteries of film booking (and its concomitant paperwork) to trained personnel.
- obtaining lowest possible rental fees: films frequently rent at different prices from various distributors.
- avoiding unreliable sources or prints of inferior quality: only professional personnel can be expected to do this.
- avoiding print damage and resulting losses; films should be checked by qualified personnel before and after each use, to avoid claims against the University, repair minor damages, insure quality of projection. Present use by individual departments does not provide this essential service.

C. The film collections of individual departments at Harvard should be known and available to other departments and to visiting professors, resulting in greater utilization of resources and lower costs.

D. Some curatorial-technical staff is required to insure condition or quality of existing film collections at Harvard.

Film 'prints' are presumed to be exact duplicates of originals. Unlike Xerox copies of original documents, however, they may never have corresponded to the original in length or content, may indeed not have come from it at all but only from an inferior copy (vide Harvard-owned prints which should be retired from use and experiences with University Film Study Center prints). In addition, prints need to be inspected and repaired periodically and stored under proper conditions. Technical staff can take care of this, except to make sure that print corresponds to original; this is a curatorial task.

E. The concept of the University Film Study Center is excellent; but Harvard must either significantly increase its level of support to make it viable or start its own internal film archive.

The UFSC was created to coordinate and support film study among New England Universities by research, publications, conferences, information exchange and a circulating film archive. Entirely due to lack of funds, it appears that the only service effectively available at present is the rental of films from their library by member schools at rates significantly below commercial rates. However:

- their list of films is unimpressive. Of the features, except for a small number of classics, many seem to serve little purpose in the teaching of film as art; others lack subtitles and are therefore unusable except for language classes. The list is non-representative and entirely eclectic. While this may partly be due to insufficient funds, it also denotes a very ominous lack of cooperation from major

distributors afraid of competition. This may permanently impair the viability of the library altogether, even if sufficient funds were to be available.

The list of shorts - a fundamental and inevitable tool of film education - is particularly disastrous. Certain items are clearly 'donated' and exhibit the customary uselessness of such gifts. In general, the short film field is not 'covered' in any manner.

- according to present users, print quality and control seems poor (prints are incomplete at times, image quality is poor).

As a result of the above, only little use can be (or is being) made by Harvard departments of this service; and only the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies and the Fine Arts Department seem to know about it.

Since, given current economic conditions, there is no assurance that the other member schools of UFSC can be prevailed upon to very significantly enlarge their contributions to the organization (nothing less would do), the question arises as to whether Harvard, though retaining UFSC membership, should not create its own film archive. An important nucleus for such an archive already exists in the form of the Carpenter Center collection.

The advantages would be considerable:

a. Choices as regards what is to be selected for the archive will be made at Harvard. A viewpoint directly related to the particular teaching program at this particular university, different in approach from those used by at least some of the other schools, will be operative in the acquisition program. (It is, in fact, dubious whether even an adequately financed central UFSC archive could ever satisfy the multiplicity of educational approaches and emphases of its member schools).

b. Elimination of ever-escalating rental fees for film. A saving will be realized after acquisition costs have been recouped, since films will be used year after year by various professors.

c. Free availability of film. At a university, film as study and research material should be as freely available as are books, for both individual or class study at any time.

d. Availability inevitably increases utilization, thereby maximizing educational value.

A film archive at Harvard could doubtlessly become one of the best university film collections in the country. To be of the utmost educational value, it should, among other materials, contain the following:

- a selected number of carefully chosen classics and contemporary works, as well as key sequences excerpted from them or other films, suitable for detailed class study as regards style, content, camera work, editing, visual rhythms, sound track, acting and decor.

- socio-political documentaries, films in the sciences, literature, art, history, sociology, for 'film-as-art' study and for educational

utilization in non-film courses.

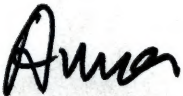
- a group of titles particularly useful for analysis as film as a visual and kinetic art (avant-garde films and films related to modern art).

F. Research materials pertaining to film in the various Harvard libraries (books, monographs, magazines, program notes, catalogs) must be transformed into a comprehensive, constantly up-to-date collection.

G. A continuing study of the new film-related technological tools (videotapes, super-8, cassettes, cable television, etc.) needs to be undertaken so as to integrate this new educational hardware into the evolving film curriculum, both in class and as a research tool.

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This memorandum is of necessity incomplete and undoubtedly subject to modification; hopefully, however, it may serve as a step toward the fuller integration of film into the Harvard curriculum in a meaningful, educationally valid manner.



Amos Vogel

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